

**Testimony of**  
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**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere**  
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## **Introduction**

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Subcommittee, it is an honor to appear before you this afternoon. As Senior Regional Advisor for the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) team in USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), I have been intimately involved in USAID's hurricane preparedness and response efforts for the past six years. Today, I welcome the opportunity to discuss our recent hurricane response efforts as well as preparations for the 2006 hurricane season.

As you are aware, natural disasters are a constant threat to the LAC region, and USAID has long been involved in preparing for and responding to the effects of hurricanes. We support activities that mitigate the effects of natural disasters and strengthen the capacity of local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to respond effectively. USAID/OFDA offices are engaged in year-round activities to prepare for the hurricane season, including coordination activities with U.S. Government (USG) agencies, local disaster response officials, and international organization (IO) and NGO partners. All of these activities ensure that, when a hurricane hits, we and all of our partners are prepared to provide rapid, life-saving assistance to survivors.

## **Increased hurricane activity**

The 2004 and 2005 hurricane seasons were among the most active on record, requiring unprecedented multi-country USAID responses. During 2004, USAID responded to four hurricanes and one tropical storm in six countries—the Bahamas, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. During 2005, USAID responded to five hurricanes and one tropical storm in ten countries—Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Haiti, Grenada, the Bahamas, and Cuba. In 2004 and 2005, USAID/OFDA provided a total of \$10.5 million in humanitarian assistance and deployed more than 50 staff members to affected areas.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association (NOAA), 2006 is forecast to bring 13-16 named storms, including 8-10 hurricanes, 4-6 of them intense. By contrast, the historical average is for 11 named storms and 6 hurricanes, with 2 major hurricanes. In 2005, the Atlantic hurricane season contained a record 28 named storms, including 15 hurricanes, with 7 major hurricanes. A major hurricane has maximum sustained winds of 111 miles per hour and is at least a Category 3 on the Saffir-Simpson scale.

## **Preparedness and Mitigation Activities**

Although no amount of preparation can prevent the devastating effects of hurricanes, disaster preparedness and mitigation programs can work to reduce the loss of human life and lessen the economic impacts caused by disasters. USAID funds multiple programs that work to identify, prioritize, and reduce risks throughout the Caribbean and Central America. USAID also promotes local and national self-sufficiency in disaster preparedness and management. USAID's programs build upon and strengthen the capacity of established national and regional disaster management institutions, many of which have the ability to meet most emergency needs after an event.

In order to help local and national authorities develop the capabilities needed to respond to natural disasters and to promote their self-sufficiency, USAID supports a year-round Regional Disaster Assistance Program (RDAP) for countries in the region. The courses provide instruction in disaster management concepts, training methods, and technical disciplines such as search and rescue, shelter management, and mitigation activities. Participants are provided with the knowledge and skills required to replicate the training program. As part of the RDAP, every year OFDA/LAC develops country plans for each program country to identify priorities and lay out a strategy and training activities for the following year.

Since the RDAP was established in 1989, more than 41,000 people in 26 countries have been trained and 3,800 participants certified as active instructors. Many of these individuals have assumed leadership roles in national disaster management organizations and presently conduct training in their own countries using their own resources. The RDAP is a prime example of how USAID investments in training and capacity building have paid off. Following Hurricane Mitch, RDAP trainings with Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have significantly reduced the need for outside disaster management assistance. In Costa Rica, in particular, disaster relief officials are now largely able to respond to emergencies without international assistance.

Some other examples of preparedness and mitigation activities include a regional emergency health preparedness program, a Disaster Mitigation Facility for the Caribbean (DMFC), and a Disaster Risk Management Program in Haiti. Since 1998, USAID/OFDA has supported Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) efforts to promote improved disaster preparedness and response in the health sector, including production and dissemination of training materials and health guidelines, support for developing building codes for health and water facilities, and health surveillance for local communities in the immediate post-disaster

period. Since 2000, USAID/OFDA has supported Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) efforts to establish the DMFC to promote sustainable development through reduced risk and losses from natural hazards. Finally, USAID/OFDA has supported recent disaster response simulations which have taken place in Central America, including Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica.

### **Seasonal Pre-Planning**

We are engaged annually in a variety of activities to prepare for the hurricane season, many of which revolve around sharing information within USAID and the USG as well as with local disaster relief officials, NGO and IO partners, and the general public. The following is a summary of USAID/OFDA's planning, coordination, and information outreach efforts in the last few months.

In April 2006, our regional team met with USAID/OFDA staff in Washington for our annual hurricane planning meeting. Washington team members include specialists in programming, information management and logistics as well as a military liaison specialist. USAID used this meeting to discuss hurricane forecasts, tracking mechanisms, and event triggers, as well as specific response staffing and standard operating procedures, ongoing coordination efforts with SOUTHCOM in Miami, the status of USAID/OFDA stockpiles in Miami, and upcoming information outreach efforts within the USG and with NGO partners. Following the meeting, USAID issued a cable related to hurricane preparedness to coincide with the official start of hurricane season on June 1.

On May 23, 2006, USAID held its second annual press conference in Miami, Florida, and released a public statement on hurricane preparedness activities to increase public awareness of the USG's role in humanitarian assistance in the LAC region. Press from the U.S., as well as from local Latin American and Haitian communities, attended. Humanitarian partners including Americas Relief and Food for the Poor were also present.

USAID/OFDA has a team of five Regional Advisors for LAC based in San José, Costa Rica, and Bridgetown, Barbados, as well as a network of consultants throughout the LAC region. The LAC team frequently meets with local disaster response officials and NGO and IO partners throughout the region to ensure successful coordination during the hurricane season. These meetings reinforce key messages about hurricane planning and safety and foster relationships among USAID, host country governments, and civil society groups. In preparation for the 2006 hurricane season, USAID/OFDA Regional Advisors have met with disaster response officials from at least 13 countries throughout Central America and the

Caribbean as well as representatives from PAHO, the U.N., the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the American Red Cross, World Vision, CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and Save the Children (SC), among others. This is in addition to coordination meetings with other major donors, including the European Union, the U.K, Canada, and Japan.

In May and June 2006, LAC Regional Advisors traveled to USAID Missions in the Caribbean and Central America, including Haiti, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Bahamas, Barbados, Costa Rica, Panama, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Trinidad and Tobago and briefed Emergency Action Committees, including the Mission Disaster Relief Officer (MDRO), on best practices during a hurricane. (Meetings in Belize, Mexico and El Salvador are scheduled for July.) A Mission preparedness briefing provides an overview of USAID's capabilities and procedures during a disaster response, allows USAID and the Mission to review and revise the Mission Disaster Relief Plans (MDRPs), ensures the Missions are as prepared as possible for the hurricane season, and establishes a relationship between USAID/OFDA/LAC and the MDRO, who serves as the Mission's principal point of contact in the event of a disaster. Also in May, a separate meeting with Central America and Mexico MDROs took place in El Salvador, providing USAID and MDROs a chance to discuss lessons learned from the 2005 hurricane season.

From June 26-29, 2006 to promote collaboration and information sharing, the USAID/OFDA/LAC team is conducting hurricane preparedness briefings in Washington for USAID's regional bureau for Latin American and the Caribbean (USAID/LAC), the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Department of Defense, the National Security Council and Congress. To advance understanding of USAID's hurricane preparedness efforts among emergency response officials, I represented USAID at the National Hurricane Conference in Orlando, Florida, on April 11, 2006. The conference was attended by disaster management officials and representatives from all over Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **USAID Disaster Response Resources**

In addition to USAID/OFDA Regional Advisors, consultants are often based in-country or close by and as a result maintain close contact with local disaster response officials. Throughout the hurricane season, USAID/OFDA's Regional Offices provide regular and timely storm monitoring and send email alerts to missions and embassies via relevant MDROs when a storm is developing. When a storm could potentially make landfall, USAID contacts the relevant MDROs by telephone to discuss preparations. At the same time, the team in Washington

provides daily email alerts for decision makers in USAID/OFDA, State, and USAID/LAC.

USAID/OFDA Regional Advisors and consultants are available for immediate deployment to disaster sites throughout the region. In cases where a country is in the direct path of a storm, staff and relief supplies may be pre-deployed prior to the storm in order to immediately provide assistance and conduct humanitarian assessments. In the event that a hurricane causes significant damage, USAID may deploy an assessment team or a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART), composed of USAID/OFDA Regional Advisors, OFDA/LAC consultants, and/or USAID/OFDA/Washington staff who provide expertise in areas such as health, water and sanitation, and shelter as well as administration, communications, information, logistics, and military liaison services.

USAID/OFDA also maintains agreements with other USG agencies and organizations with expertise that can help support disaster responses. These include the U.S. Forest Service, NOAA, U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC), U.S. Geological Survey, and Fairfax County (VA) and L.A. County (CA) Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams. In addition, USAID frequently coordinates with the U.S. military, as military assets are frequently best positioned to respond when integral infrastructure has been destroyed. To facilitate communication between USAID and DOD, a USAID/OFDA/OLU representative is stationed in Miami to liaise with SOUTHCOM throughout the hurricane season.

In advance of the hurricane season, USAID replenishes stockpiled relief commodities—such as plastic sheeting, blankets, water containers, and health supplies—in Miami, Florida, for rapid deployment in the region. Items such as water bladders and chainsaws have been added in recent years. For the 2006 hurricane season, we have stocked a 30,000 square foot warehouse with relief supplies, or enough to serve the needs of approximately 100,000 affected people. By locating commodities in Miami, USAID can dispatch items in a timely fashion and via commercial air-freight at a fraction of the cost of chartering private or military aircraft. Once USAID/OFDA Regional Advisors identify needs, we can dispatch stocked relief supplies to the affected areas within a day and procured supplies within approximately 48 hours. USAID/OFDA also maintains an airplane stand-by contract in the Caribbean and upon request is able to charter a plane to conduct aerial assessments.

### **Lessons learned**

Following each hurricane season, USAID convenes a lessons learned meeting, with

participants from OFDA and relevant USG agencies, to review the hurricane response in LAC. Lessons learned are then incorporated into planning activities for the following hurricane season. USAID's current disaster response options, as well as its preparedness and mitigation portfolio, are the cumulative result of the integration of lessons learned over the years. Last year, lessons learned included an expansion of publicity for USG assistance, an emphasis on cash for work activities in certain disaster situations, and continued use of surge capacity.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, USAID is engaged in a variety of activities to respond to the effects of hurricanes in Latin America and the Caribbean. For more than 20 years, our work in the region has worked to reduce the effects of hurricanes while increasing the ability of affected countries to respond. Through focused efforts on preparedness and mitigation, we are already seeing progress in the ability of LAC countries to take the lead on disaster response. When hurricanes of extreme magnitude occur, USAID remains poised to assist the governments of affected countries to respond to the needs of their people.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I welcome any questions that you and other Members of the Subcommittee may have. Thank you.